

Electronic connectivity isn't all that great, warns computer guru

June 22 2005

"Although sophisticated electronics gadgets are making the world appear smaller, distance should not die," said computer guru Darl Kolb earlier this week at New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT). Kolb, a visiting professor from the University of Auckland Business School, New Zealand, championed redefining the notion of distance as the electronic world changes lives. UPS Information Services, Mahwah, funded the lecture series sponsored by NJIT's College of Computing Sciences.

"Certainly, technological connectivity has increased exponentially in the last few decades," Kolb told the audience. "And, this connectivity has rendered the perception that distance as a phenomenon is diminishing."

But technical connectivity has its limitations and barriers, he warned. It is unevenly distributed and it doesn't always work well. And despite the availability of this highly connected world, people must continue to treat the concept of distance seriously. "Improvements in communication technology cannot completely overcome human needs for personal space, privacy and disconnections from others," Kolb said.

How to accomplish this task? Redefine distance.

"It ought not to be based on place or time," he said, "but on the disconnections between people. These discontinuities are physical or technical in nature (like waiting for trains or planes, being unable to access email, no cell phone coverage) and/or social and cultural (language barriers, lack of cross cultural understanding, political and

economic barriers and so on). The social and cultural gaps are more challenging than faster or more pervasive Internet connectivity, he added.

Kolb then challenged the audience to think of what distance might mean in increasingly more mobile environments. How will people function when newer applications such as more complicated cell phones or wearable computers, render distances even less important.

"Essentially, how far is one point from another, when the destinations--or people-- are moving?" Kolb asked. His answer: Discontinuous connectivity. "Such connectivity allows us to deal with dynamic distance in a way that has meaning," he said pointing out how two-way radios connect mobile police, fire and service vehicles regardless of where they are physically located.

Beyond the theoretical, Kolb also studies how groups and organizations manage distance and isolation, an issue for New Zealand firms in a global economy. He has been gathering case material in Brazil and Alaska and Western Australia.

Kolb is a senior lecturer and group leader at the University of Auckland Business School, where he has taught in the MBA, undergraduate and graduate programs since 1992. His co-authored textbook (with Kerr Inkson), *Management: Perspectives for New Zealand* (Addison-Wesley-Longman), is widely-used in New Zealand.

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Source: New Jersey Institute of Technology

Citation: Electronic connectivity isn't all that great, warns computer guru (2005, June 22)
retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2005-06-electronic-isnt-great-guru.html>

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